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# Deep Change—Diversity at Its Simplest

by Sandra Rios Balderrama

Phoenix, Arizona

At its simplest “diversity” is about people. People who want to make a change from that which appears static or homogenous. People who want to create change in and around themselves. In my view, diversity is about people who want to deal with reality as it is, as it has been, as it will be.

But my reality may not be yours. Most of the time we say the word *diversity* using different assumptions and definitions. Some call it a concept, an ideology, a trend, an issue. Some call it a “movement.” Call it what you want. Stretch it far and wide. Focus on the center of the peach kernel. For some, diversity is a choice of how one wants to work, of how one wants to live, of how one wants to relate to other people within this country, within the world. It is about holding up an earth flag along with your national flag, gay pride flag, POW/MIA flag, if you wish. That is my definition. Create your own. But make sure that it is meaningful to you. And not your window dressing. We can cover up for anyone but ourselves.

I suggest this approach and encourage personal reflection because although organizational “diversity” statements are worthy and important, an individual working the reference desk, or making a collection development decision, or a hiring decision can sabotage the best of vision statements. There is power “on the desk.” There is power behind closed doors. Everyday leadership and “small” acts of intertwined personal and professional accountability go a long way to create an environment conducive to mutual respect, reciprocity, and learning. This is an environment where I want to work.

“Diversity” has not been a choice for Americans. It was “imposed” upon those of us who live on this land currently identified as the United States. As long as we choose to live, work, plant or study here, we are accountable for the herstory/history that brought us to this present moment, this

present day. Call it the frustrating debris. The remnants. The “fall out.” Call it a blessing bathed in trauma, victory, integrity, courage, and destiny. Call it a mystery of forever wondering why it occurred. Call it living in the past and not moving on to the future. Call it honored memory. Regardless, here we are—truly a multicultural population with diverse lifestyles, sexual orientations, learning styles, etc. “... my etcetera country, my wounded country, my child, my tears, my obsession” (Alegria, Claribel).

Some of us were brought by force. Some of us had our homes taken by force. Some of us “ran” here by choice—we ran, boated, trained, walked, and crawled for our lives. How could we forget this? Why do we forget? That nothing here was “discovered” for the first time. And that those who survived did not survive as an empty slate. Language may have been beaten out of people. Long black hair was cut. When I recently viewed *The Laramie Project*, it seemed just yesterday that Matthew Shepherd\* was left hanging. Make no mistake. There is a memory. Memory prevailed. And there are strategies for retaining that which speaks to us from the past in an honest and authentic way. Even an assimilated, U.S. educated, English-speaking woman of 2003 still “feels” the sound of her grandmother clapping dough between her hands. She “feels” the smell of the tortilla toasting on the hotplate as she awakens, on Saturday morning, before church, in Los Angeles. This gives her memory of “the fallout” but it is also restorative.

Libraries, today’s libraries, accessible libraries help us remember the history and herstory. We are dangerous.

In October or November 1989, I was part of a Transition into Management Program sponsored by UCLA and the California State Library. Henry Der, then Executive Director of Chinese for Affirmative Action, told ten of us that the library needed to be the place where new immigrants learned about civil rights and where Americans of every background learned about global situations that catalyzed



migration to the U.S. In Der's mind, libraries were the place to exchange and reciprocate information and history/herstory and thus, begin building a shared future. Somewhere along the way, between U.S. citizenship classes and U.S. education for Americans, there was a disconnect that in Der's mind, librarians as educators, bridge builders, information navigators could quite naturally and powerfully address.

When I think about libraries and about the future I usually think of a 24/7 "mercado," a huge open market that you might find in Italy, France, Mexico, maybe even Portland—many places in the world that I have never been. Perhaps it is the color and noise of exchange and bartering that I find pleasing. The mercado is a multisensory environment that keeps me alert, challenged, frustrated, as well as pleased. In the library work environment I picture the richest of diverse appearances, ideas, and perspectives at the table where something is decided, designed, discussed and, yes, maybe even bartered.

There is inevitably tension. There is tension because each of us loves our favorite ideas, epiphanies, stories. There is tension because one of us has an untold story that cannot tolerate hearing another's so freely told. There is tension because one of us resents the silence of another—the peace with which another chooses to listen and reflect before talking. There is tension because we don't know how to listen more, talk less or talk up more, listen less.

But in my "picture" usually there is food somewhere at the beginning or the end. Food is exchanged. Or a story, laugh, song, or poem. Foods for the soul. And when I remember this meeting of decision making, design or information exchange, I remember the "face" that passed me the blueberry muffin covered by the Guatemalan textile cloth and lying in the Kenyan basket. Effective communication amongst diverse peoples that no longer rely on a mainstream of standards requires stamina,

patience, willingness to listen deeply and to look "again," and the courage to relax the ego in order to develop new ways of communicating on behalf of a shared goal—service to library users.

We know with our gut, values, ethics, mother wit, our rationale, left and/or right minds, our quantitative and qualitative analyses that diversity is about human beings striving to "become" more whole as individuals and more "real" as a global village. This global village is beyond e-mailing a pen pal in Honduras or reading a blog from Iraq. The electronic and digital global villages have had an important role in forcing us to deal with one another (beyond a box of crayons, a mixed salad, a beautiful quilt, a rainbow of handheld hands), but being behind the computer screen is different than the face-to-face contact we "face" in everyday life. In library work, we share "face" time with colleagues, co-workers, patrons, students, advocates, trustees, and stakeholders. At the degree or level of "face" is where we attempt to interact on behalf of delivering excellent service and/or on behalf of having a work environment that is more than tolerable—that is generative and conducive to creativity, evaluation, and renewal. Throw a little acknowledgment and respect in and we are more than happy. Our standards of appraisal rise from "It's better than a kick in the butt" or "No news is good news" to "My administrators are not afraid to tell me I've done a good job" or "Our library not only looks at people's experience but at their potential."

Dipping into actions that result from "soft skills" is referred to as "touchy-feely." Dipping into actions that result from "hard skills" is referred to as "good business." I happen to believe that soft skills are more difficult to hone and to practice. In reality interpersonal skills may never carry the same weight as technological skills and most standards of operation and performance are scientifically and quantitatively bound. Whether you weep at the sight of



Private First Class Lori Piestewa's\* family delivering big pots of food or trays covered by crinkled foil upstairs to the family's porch, or whether you rely on the up-to-the-minute demographic or scientific data, when you are implementing meaningful diversity work you must know that you will be going against the grain. Tears can be ridiculed. Data can be manipulated. Diversity is typically repelled and resisted. But with time, diligence, persistence, integrity and, I believe, ethics, the salmon makes it back home to the root, the kernel, the base, the heartbeat—the global drumbeat—that is at the base of diversity.

At the first level of diversity, typically our most successful, is programming and collections. No matter what our background we are capable as librarians of displaying, programming, and building collections with multiculturalism and intellectual diversity in mind. We know about Gay Pride month. We know about Spanish-language materials. We know we must include small press publications. This is an important level. A good level.

At the second level of diversity, we focus on staffing. This is who we work with, work for, work above in the organic or mechanical structures of our library organizations. We provide great programming but we look around and at “face value” we see mirrors of ourselves but not of the people we serve or want to serve. It is possible that we as a homogenous group think differently and work differently, but when we come together at the library meeting table we don't see whom we do laundry next to, who owns the restaurants down the block, who lives next door, who travels on their skateboard, or who walks with Ethiopian fabrics billowing in slight breezes. We know we are capable of learning a different language or of “brushing up” on another culture but we know deeply that there is only so far we can go. We will always be an outsider.

It's OK. We don't have to impose ourselves or become awkward “culture

vultures.” We don't have to pretend. Instead we recruit for diversity in an honest, authentic manner. We actively and purposely look for people who will be different from us. We look for qualifications and the rest is a surprise package. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps we obtain the visual diversity of the current Bush administration. This is good. I like to see different colors and genders of people. Perhaps, in addition to visible diversity, we get intellectual diversity and fresh bravery.

These last qualities may or may not set the system(s) of comfort on edge. Regardless, we focus and we go beyond a good faith effort, implement diverse strategies, re-articulate our job descriptions and recruitment brochures, connect with new or mainstream library groups or with those representing the GLBT, multicultural, and people with disability communities, and stretch timeframes if we need to in order to reach a diverse audience of qualified applicants. We do things differently because we are serious about a diverse workforce. Whew! Lots of work, lots of energy, and serious resources are required at this important level of inclusion and opportunity. It is a good level.

At the third level of diversity we are colorful at the table, reference desk, and on staff development day. We implement a shared library vision. We are able to finally say that we have visible diversity throughout the ranks. We may be able to include true and natural photos of visible diversity in our recruitment brochures. But there remains an element of cookie-cutterism, an expectation of “conformity” as to what organizational behavior, meeting protocol, and standards and appraisals of performance look like. Circles try to be squares. Squares try to be circles. Elephants try to lose weight to fit in the giraffe's house (Thomas, Roosevelt).

President's Bush's administration or the diverse composition of our armed forces are other examples. Most often, in the case of libraries, are the unspoken standards, measurements and gauges that are potentially



detrimental to the contributions of employees from any affinity group who don't "measure up" to those particular standards. This is an important level, however, because it reduces visible homogeneity. It creates a workforce that will probably be more attractive to potential library users. This level illustrates a choice to participate and to be included in the common recognitions and rewards of being "American." Many paved a path with a machete to obtain and implement this right—to become part of the President's cabinet or the Supreme Court, to use the elevators at ALA conferences (like A.P. Marshall\*), or to be part of the armed services. Yet I would like to see us push further to another level—deeper or higher—depending on your metaphors.

At the fourth level of diversity is a rainbow coalition. It devotes time to creating new and reviewing traditional operating principles, values, and communication methods. Perhaps the methods of "rounds" (going around the room to hear everyone and allowing for introverts to think and speak without interruption), true brainstorming (getting the ideas out in a non-judgmental, non-interrupted, non-edited manner), "interest-based" negotiations (focus on the interest and the issue not the person or the "problem"), incorporation of multisensory data (for visual people like me), or a dozen other methods may be explored or designed. The rainbow coalition figures out "how" it will work together. It will create a shared agreement for how to work together and how to gather and incorporate "multiplex" perspectives.

The group has decided that mainstream standards no longer serve the contemporary workforce and thus start to create new guidelines and agreements in order to obtain the richest fruit, bartering, and sounds of the "mercado." At this level the group may be able to tackle and effectively honor the intellectual diversity of each person, each person in part forever subject to appearance or attached to some affinity group, but at the same

time contributing individual thoughts, perspectives, ideas, plans, strategies not so much because these might be Latina thoughts but because like my Grandma used to say with gusto, "Sandra!! God gave us a mind!" And at this level the group will begin to understand that gravitation to any affinity group can happen at the same time as one's own individuality is expressed. For example, while in charge of the Spectrum Scholarship Initiative at ALA I often had to explain: "No, the Spectrum Scholars are not all straight. They are gay, bisexual, lesbian. Some have disabilities that are visible or not visible to you. Some are also Jewish. Some are Asian and American Indian at the same time. Some are straight. Some were born in this country. Others only reside here. Some are over 55; others are in their 20s. They are every one of us and they are not any one of us." At this fourth level we begin to live more comfortably with simplicity and complexity. We begin to understand we know little but we understand what is the right thing to do.

At the fifth level of diversity are mutual reciprocation, respect, and exchange. Skill for skill. Lesson for lesson. Coins for a kilo of tangelos. Heart for heart. At this level I am recruited to a library; I get the job; I learn about the new "operating principles" and the overall expectations of a shared vision. I am interested and am willing to learn and to practice them. But if there is "true" diversity, then I expect the employer and organization to be interested in learning from me and to consider incorporating my added value into the organization's values. It is not really about "me." It is really about consistent growth, generation, incorporation and evaluation of both a work environment and the service/product provided. As with my employer, I have mutual respect for the user and my colleagues. I am not attempting to "better" or "empower" someone that I am superior to. I share my skill. I learn from others' questions and interests. I



simply “walk” in the manner of the leaders I admire. I act even though I won’t be written up in the *American Libraries*. I speak softly. I speak enthusiastically in my native language without punishment. I not only applaud or throw tomatoes from the sidelines but I participate in the moment. If there is a hate crime against a gay human being then I see it as a Latina/Jewish/Arabic/feminist/paraplegic problem. We share the problem, hurt, issue, pain, feeling, data gathering for another human whose “becoming” was cut down.

Ms. Alberta Tenorio, library assistant at the Oakland Public Library, advised the 1999 ALA Spectrum Scholars during the “Spirit of Service Leadership” curriculum: “Don’t do it for ‘them,’ do it for you.” Henry Gardner, past city manager for Oakland, CA, advised California library workers at a 1995 or 1996 California Library Association conference: “If you can’t be enlightened regarding diversity then be selfish. Do it for yourself and the future of this country, the future of libraries.” At the 1998 Colorado Library Association, Susan Kotarba, librarian with the Denver Public Library, said, “I have met the future librarians that I want to work with. They are the teenagers that work in my library.” The teenagers are nothing less than a future librarian. (Gasp.) Someone else had told me that the young group of teenagers on one of the original Spectrum posters looked like “gang bangers.” Ah. Pumping heart. The teenagers are our librarians.

PFC Piestewa’s family and friends cook in big pots like my family does. Matthew Shepherd was my Uncle Joe. Alberta is my grandmother. Claribel Alegria’s “etc.” country of El Salvador is my own. Mr. A.P. Marshall is Cesar Chavez. Elevators. Vineyards. There is both power and need in the least obvious places. The heartbeat. The shared drumbeat that is our global mother. Perhaps this fifth level might be the last level, the deepest level, the peach kernel. Frankly, I am not sure.

May your levels, your steps, your actions, your reflections, your attempts all

be acknowledged. May they all be “true.” May you remember the face of the person who passed you the bread. May discomforts around diversity eventually enlighten. May you demonstrate courage to try something new. May you give one another the benefit of the doubt. May you bark and growl, bring out the statistics, draw pictures and circles—in a meeting where there are shared agreements of time and communication. May your exchanges at your local mercado be fruitful. May your worktables produce splinters. May your famous evergreens reciprocate oxygen for your carbon dioxide.

*This article is dedicated to Faye Chadwell and my friends at Multnomah County Library: Sara Ryan, Patricia Welch, Ruth Metz, and the Latino Outreach staff.*

#### \*Notes

21-year old Matthew Shepherd died on October 12, 1998, the victim of an anti-gay hate crime perpetrated in Laramie, Wyoming.

Private First Class Lori Piestewa, age 23, was the first Native American woman in the U.S. armed forces to die as a result of combat. Piestewa was part of the Army’s 507th Maintenance Company stationed in Iraq during March 2003.

Librarian, author and scholar, A. P. (Albert Prince) Marshall contributed much to African American librarianship. The father of ALA OLOS Director Satia Orange, Marshall died in 2000.

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